Pass the Atlantic City casino smoking ban

By Star-Ledger Editorial Board/The Star-Ledger

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AP Photo/Cie StroudA woman holds a cigarette in her hand as she plays a slot machine at the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City.

Shamefully, Atlantic City council members and state legislators continue to expose dealers and other casino employees to serious health risks by refusing to **ban smoking on casino floors**.

The legislature, after allowing casinos to escape the statewide indoor smoking ban in 2006, has refused to close this loophole. Lawmakers continually have chosen casino balance sheets over the health of the average Joe. But this is a moral, not economic issue: What amount of money makes it acceptable to put people's lives at risk?

We know the answer: None.

And that's why there's a tobacco stain on New Jersey's soul.

The Atlantic City council has a second chance to do the right thing and pass a casino smoking ban immediately. The council, when it rescinded a short-lived ban last October, said it would revisit the issue in 12 months. The debate should start at tonight's council meeting, although there is no mention of the issue on the agenda.

Not that there's much reason to hope for a ban. Council president **William "Speedy" Marsh**, who favors one, says: "I don't see where many minds have changed on the council."

For some reason, when it comes to casinos, New Jersey's elected officials ignore the overwhelming scientific evidence detailing the devastating effects of second-hand smoke and the astronomical health care costs linked to it: New Jersey spends $3.17 billion annually in smoking-related health care costs.

The state banned smoking from restaurants and bars and all public buildings (including the Statehouse) to protect patrons and waitresses and bartenders and the rest of us. The law protects even hypocritical legislators, who make sure they work in a smoke-free environment.

Secondhand smoke kills an estimated 46,000 Americans from heart disease every year, according to the CDC and the American Heart Association. But blowing smoke in someone's face is okay when that someone is a dealer or casino worker.

New Jersey casino floors are 75 percent non-smoking and 25 percent smoking. But partitions, required by law, are inadequate or non-existent. So is enforcement. Walls are a lousy defense, anyway. Smoke is disobedient. It doesn't stay put. And science shows that filtration systems

are insufficient and that concentrating tobacco smoke in a confined area actually makes it deadlier.

Casinos, struggling in the recession, insist a smoking ban will drive away more gamblers, leading to further job cuts. But nobody knows how gamblers will respond. Maybe the ban will encourage more nonsmokers to gamble. Maybe smokers, already accustomed to restrictions, will adjust and simply take it outside.

When New Jersey was passing the indoor smoking ban in 2006, the economy was chugging along. Still, the casinos lobbied for — and received — an exemption. That convinces us that, as far as they're concerned, there never will be an acceptable time for a smoking ban. Restaurant and bar lobbies incorrectly predicted doom for those industries, which have been unaffected — if not helped — by the ban.

Opponents of the ban insist gambling and drinking and smoking go together. Well, actually, they don't. Studies have found that the majority of gamblers don't drink and 82 percent of them don't smoke.

Through all of the debate, one argument remains indisputable: Second-hand smoke kills.

But in New Jersey, cash trumps cancer risks.

"A 100 percent smoking ban would be catastrophic," said **Mark Juliano**, CEO of Trump Entertainment Resorts. "Right now, we can't face another negative."

Since when is saving lives a negative?